

Illegitimi non carborundum

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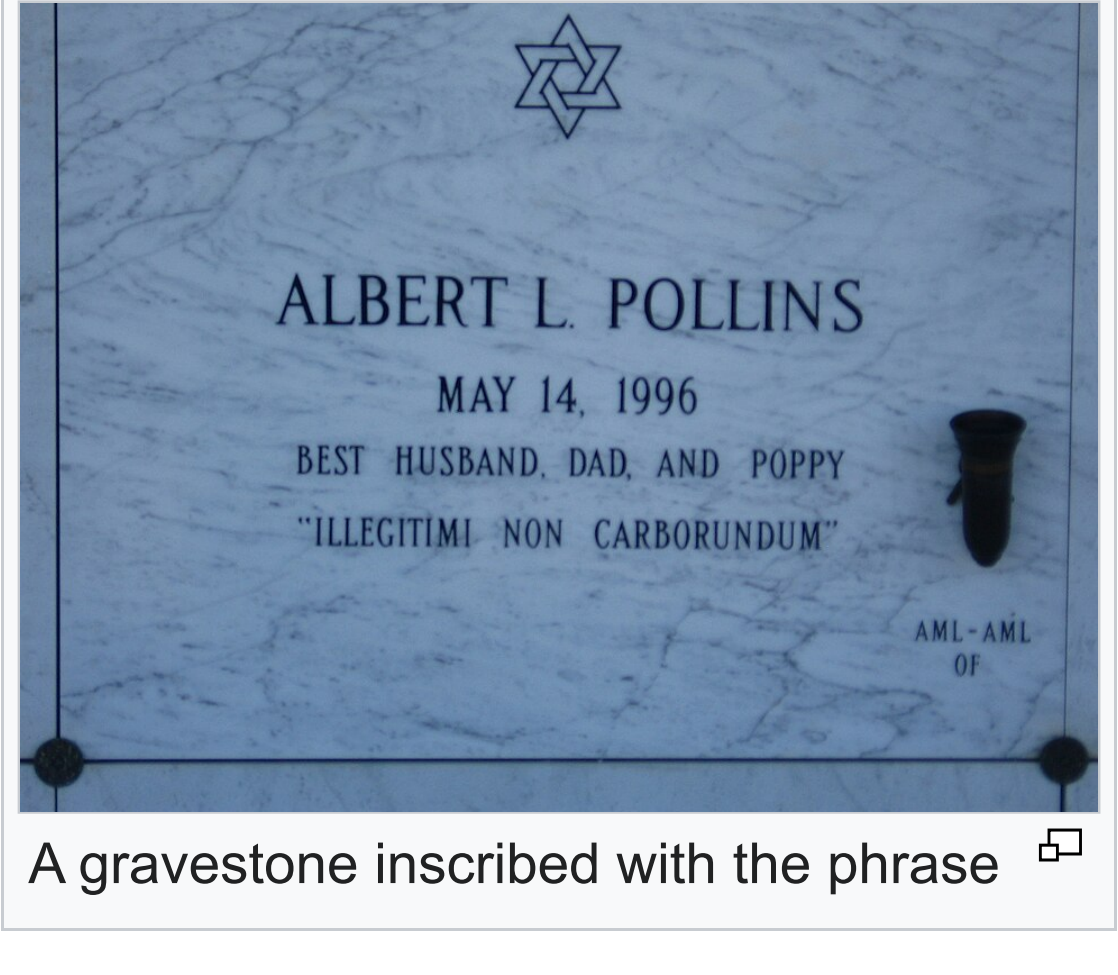
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*For the album by The Toasters, see **Don't Let the Bastards Grind You Down**.*

Illegitimi non carborundum is a **mock-Latin aphorism**, often translated as "Don't let the bastards grind you down". The phrase itself has no meaning in **Latin** and can only be mock-translated.

History

The phrase originated during **World War II**. **Lexicographer Eric Partridge** attributes it to British army intelligence very early in the war (using the dative plural *illegitimis*).^[1]



The phrase was adopted by US Army General "**Vinegar**" **Joe Stilwell** as his motto during the war, in the form *Illegitimati non carborundum*.^[1]^[2]^[3] It was later further popularized in the US by 1964 presidential candidate **Barry Goldwater**.^[1]

The phrase is also used as the first line of one of the extra **dog Latin** verses added in 1953 to an unofficial school song at Harvard University, "**Ten Thousand Men of Harvard**". This most frequently played **fight song** of the **Harvard University Band** is, to some extent, a parody of more solemn school songs like "Fair Harvard thy Sons to your Jubilee Throng". The first verse is a nonsense sequence of Latin clichés:

Illegitimum non carborundum;
Domine salvum fac.
Illegitimum non carborundum;
Domine salvum fac.
Gaudeamus igitur!
Veritas non sequitur?
Illegitimum non carborundum—ipso facto!^[4]

The phrase, often accompanied by an English translation, has appeared in many places:

- 1958, the novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and **film of the same name**, as the motto of the main character, Arthur Seaton.
- 1959, **Henry Slesar**'s mystery novel set in an advertising office *The Grey Flannel Shroud* (though not in its 1958 publication in *Cosmopolitan*
- 1963, possibly earlier, as *illegitimus non carborundum* used as the motto incorporated into the masthead of the *Whitehorse Star* newspaper.^[5]
- 1967, the song "Bill and Annie", on the album **Running, Jumping, Standing Still** by **Spider John Koerner and Willie Murphy**.
- 1982, the song "(Don't Let 'Em) Grind Ya Down", on the album **Iron Fist** by **Motörhead**.
- 1982, as the motto of on the city crest of Mellonville, in the **SCTV** episode "Mellonvote".
- 1984, the motto of 2nd battalion, **1st Special Forces Group (United States)**
- 1985 (as *Nolite te Bastardes Carborundorum*), the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*.^[6] The phrase is depicted as **graffiti** representing a "silent revolt" by a "slave woman in a futuristic totalitarian regime".^[7] *Vanity Fair* called the phrase a "feminist rallying cry".^[8]
- 1990, the chorus of **Don't Let The Bastards (Get You Down)**, on the album **Third World Warrior** by **Kris Kristofferson** is "Don't let the bastards get you down".
- 1991, the final line of the chorus in the **U2** song "**Acrobat**" is "Don't let the bastards grind you down".
- 1997, the **second-wave ska** band **The Toasters**' song "Don't Let The Bastards Grind You Down" appeared in the pilot episode of the animated series *Mission Hill*.^[9]
- 2011, the chorus of **Cheers (Drink to That)**, a single on **Rihanna**'s album **Loud** repeats "Don't let the bastards get you down".
- 2013, Don't Let the Bastards Get You Down, a song on the album Meet Me at the Edge of the World by the Ohio band **Over the Rhine**".
- 2014, the desk of former **Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives John Boehner**.^[10]
- 2024, chapter title in **Anthony Fauci**'s memoir "On Call: A Doctor's Journey in Public Health".^[11]

"Latin" meaning

The sentence is **Dog Latin**; that is, it is a Latin–English pun with only a mock translation.

The first word varies between *illegitimi* and *illegitimis*. *Illegitimi* is presumably the nominative plural of *illegitimus* meaning "unlawful" or "outlaw" in Latin, but interpreted as English "illegitimate" in the sense of "bastard" – in this case, used as a generic insult.^[12]

Illegitimis may be intended as an **ablative** plural, but if *carborundum* is intended to resemble a **gerundive**, it is more likely intended as a **dative** plural, since the gerundive takes a dative of agent. The meaning, in either case, is "by the outlaws/bastards."

The second word *non* is a straightforward negation.

The third word, *carborundum*, is an abrasive used for industrial grinding. It is not a Latin word; instead, it is a **trademark**^[13] derived from the word **corundum**, a word of **Tamil origin**.^[14]^[15] However, it resembles a Latin **gerundive**, so can be interpreted as a hypothetical "fit to be *carborere*-ed" or "to be *carborere*-ed".^[16]

If *carborere* (**third conjugation**) were a Latin word meaning "to grind down", *Illegitimis non carborundum* would be correct Latin for "(It/One) must not be ground down by the illegitimates".

There are many variants of the phrase, such as *Illegitimis non carborundum*, *Noli illegitimi carborundum* and *Nii illegitimi carborundum*, all of them Dog Latin. Sometimes (as in *The Handmaid's Tale*), *carborundum* is prolonged to *carborundorum*, as if a **second declension neuter genitive** plural of a noun ending in *-um*. This is purely jocular and cannot have a grammatical meaning in Latin.

See also

- List of Latin phrases**

References

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External links

- Two alternative explanations**

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